

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR HURRICANE HEARING
October 7, 2005

I want to thank everyone for being here today at this long awaited hearing. We had hoped to have this hearing back in September, but we postponed it twice – once because Hurricane Ophelia was developing and once to give the Select Committee a chance to get started with its investigation.

I participated in the Select Committee's hearing, and I made clear then that the Science Committee retained all its jurisdiction – and interest – in this subject and that we would be rescheduling our hearing. And that is why we are here today.

Unfortunately, because of the Energy Bill on the floor, my attendance today will be intermittent, but my focus is not. The National Weather Service is probably the agency we oversee that has the most impact on the everyday lives of our constituents, and we want to do everything we can to make sure it is in top form.

Based on its recent performance – trial by water, one might say – I don't think we have too much to worry about when it comes to the Weather Service. Let me repeat what I said at the Select Committee's hearing: the National Weather Service performed magnificently in tracking Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and in providing information before, during and after the hurricanes made landfall. Max Mayfield was the indispensable man in the lead-up to the storms, and we owe the entire staff of the National Weather Service a debt of gratitude.

The men and women of the Weather Service and the men and women of the armed forces who fly into the hurricanes to get data on storms get no special perks if

they've had a rough couple of days or a bad season. They have to be ready for the next storm.

I was talking the other day to Deputy Secretary Sampson of the Commerce Department, and he had just been down to visit the National Hurricane Center. He said that morale at the Center was suffering because the staff felt so saddened that Katrina had produced such suffering. That speaks volumes about the kind of people we have working for us down there.

For in reality, all the Weather Service can do is provide the best information they can – which in the case of Katrina happened to be especially accurate because conditions were ideal for monitoring the storm. In short, the Weather Service can lead officials to information, but they can't make them think. Or act, I might add.

Now that doesn't mean, of course, that nothing can be improved. We'll want to hear today about any steps the Weather Service is taking to ensure that federal, state and local officials are receiving the information that the Weather Service is putting out. But it's not the Weather Service's job, and it can't be, to ensure that others are heeding its warnings. So I hope we won't be asking our witnesses today questions that fall beyond their purview.

I also hope that we can ask questions that go beyond rehearsing the prelude to the most recent storms. We should be looking for information about the rest of the hurricane season, about what is behind the increased frequency and intensity of hurricanes, and most important, about what tools the National Weather Service needs to continue to improve its ability to forecast and track storms.

If nothing else, the horrifying events of recent weeks have underscored the value of the National Weather Service. We need to work together to make sure that the Weather Service can provide the best information possible.

Thank you.